USDA

U.S. Forest Service

National Forests in North Carolina

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Frequently Asked Questions
Wilderness Evaluations for the Nantahala and Pisgah NFs

Is the Forest Service designating wilderness areas right now?

No, only the Congress can take that action. We are revising the Nantahala and Pisgah NFs' Forest Plan as directed by the 2012 Planning Rule. This rule requires us to identify and evaluate lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. There are four steps in this process: inventory, evaluation, analysis and recommendation. As of July 2016, we are sharing the results from the evaluation step and preparing for the analysis step. We are following guidance outlined in the 2012 Planning Rule Directives, Forest Service Handbook 1909.12 Chapter 70, and the Wilderness Act of 1964.

What information is the Forest Service sharing now?

In an effort to keep the public updated and engaged in the forest plan revision process, we are sharing several documents regarding our wilderness evaluation process. The first document is the 'Areas Proposed for Analysis in the Forest Plan Draft Environmental Impact Statement by Alternative' which provides a description of the potential range of alternatives for wilderness recommendations. This document describes what the current condition for wilderness designation is and how we are proposing to move forward into the analysis of new recommendations in the draft environmental impact statement. It includes a list of recommended areas being considered for each of four alternatives. The second set of documents includes area maps and a summary table of areas by Ranger District and County. These maps display the currently designated wilderness areas, currently designated wilderness study areas, and recommended wilderness areas under consideration in each of the proposed alternatives for this forest plan revision. A third document which will be available in late July, provides the complete evaluation narratives for the 53 areas that were included in the inventory.

What is a wilderness evaluation narrative?

A wilderness evaluation narrative summarizes the wilderness characteristics of each area listed in the inventory. The evaluation narrative contains the factual information that is being used to identify areas, or portions of areas, that may move forward for further analysis in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) as potential recommended wilderness. Each area's evaluation narrative includes a general description of the area, a description of its wilderness characteristics, a description of factors affecting manageability, and a summary of whether the area contains wilderness characteristics.

What is the process for identifying and evaluating areas for potential wilderness recommendation?

The Forest Service and stakeholders created an inventory of areas that meet specific criteria outlined in the 2012 Planning Rule Directives, Forest Service Handbook 1909.12 Chapter 70, and the Wilderness Act of 1964. In October 2015, we shared our process for identifying and evaluating areas that would be considered for potential wilderness recommendation. Each area identified during the inventory process, was evaluated to determine its wilderness characteristics and factors that impact our ability to manage the area as wilderness. This information, along with input provided by the public, was used to identify which areas, or portions of areas, will move forward for analysis as potential recommended wilderness in the DEIS we are completing as part of forest plan revision. Please visit our website for a more detailed explanation.

Is the wilderness evaluation complete for the Nantahala and Pisgah NFs?

Not yet. In October 2015, we shared our wilderness inventory with the public to gather feedback on the lands that we had inventoried. Next, we evaluated each area's wilderness characteristics and manageability and drafted a report that summarizes this information. Using this, public feedback, and our resource specialists' knowledge, we have identified areas to consider for analysis as potential recommended wilderness in our upcoming Environmental Impact Statement. As part of the Environmental Impact Statement, we will analyze each potential recommended area and consider trade-offs for each proposed alternative. All of the narratives, maps, and other documents will be available on our website throughout the process. Only after the Environmental Impact Statement analysis is complete will the Forest Supervisor make a decision whether to recommend areas in the forest plan. Any recommendation in the plan remains a recommendation until Congress decides to act on the recommendation to designate wilderness.

Will the Forest Service analyze all the evaluated areas in the draft EIS?

No. We will not analyze all the evaluated areas in the draft environmental impact statement. Some areas may move forward in an alternative and others may not. Those areas that do move forward may have refined, and more easily locatable boundaries to better reflect wilderness characteristics and manageability.

Which areas will the Forest Service move from the evaluation phase into the analysis for the draft EIS?

The areas we are currently proposing to analyze in the draft EIS are listed in the 'Areas Proposed for Analysis in the Forest Plan Draft Environmental Impact Statement by Alternative' document and displayed on the accompanying maps. The tables indicate which areas we are currently proposing to analyze and in which alternative they are proposed to be included. The boundaries of these areas may be refined further in our analysis as well. The public is invited to provide feedback on the areas currently being considered for analysis.

Can I provide feedback to the areas being considered for analysis?

Like all parts of our forest plan, we are accepting feedback on these evaluations and areas to analyze in alternatives. The most useful input includes details that help us determine if there are evaluation areas, or portions of them, that should or should not be considered for analysis in the draft EIS. While there is no formal NEPA or legal comment period, we are accepting input on the objectives via comments to NCplanrevision@fs.fed.us with the subject line "Wilderness Evaluations" or by mail at this address: Attn: Plan Revision Team Leader; National Forests in NC; 160 Zilicoa St. Suite A; Asheville, NC 28801. You will also have an opportunity to review and comment on our analysis when the draft EIS is released.

How would new recommended wilderness impact air quality management?

Recommended wilderness areas do not have any regulatory restrictions on air quality. Upon designation, new wilderness areas are required to meet Class II protections, which can be compared to the typical air quality we find in the Southern Appalachians. There are three areas on the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests that receive a higher degree of protection from new sources of air pollution, known as Class I areas: Shining Rock Wilderness, Linville Gorge Wilderness and Joyce Kilmer Slickrock Wilderness. Extensions to these wilderness areas would receive also Class I designation. An expansion of the Class I area would not itself trigger additional restrictive actions. However, just as would have been required prior to the wilderness area's expansion, when there is construction of a new stationary source of pollutants, or major modification, these sources would need to evaluate if the new air pollution will cause an adverse impact to any air quality related values (especially visibility). There have not been any new federally mandated Class I areas designated in the US since the late 1970s.

How will recommended areas be managed?

When developing plan components for recommended wilderness areas, the Responsible Official has discretion to implement a range of management options. All plan components applicable to a recommended area must protect and maintain the social and ecological characteristics that provide the basis for wilderness recommendation. In addition, the plan may include one or more plan components for a recommended wilderness area that:

1. Enhance the ecological and social characteristics that provide the basis for wilderness designations;

2. Continue existing uses, only if such uses do not prevent the protection and maintenance of the social and ecological characteristics that provide the basis for wilderness designation;

3. Alter existing uses, subject to valid existing rights; or

4. Eliminate existing uses, except those uses subject to valid existing rights.

How will the feedback I provide now be used?

We will consider all the public feedback we receive now as public participation during the wilderness evaluation process. We will review the feedback we receive and give consideration to it as we make a determination about which areas to include in one or more alternatives of the draft EIS for analysis as potential recommended wilderness.

How is the Forest Service collaborating with the public?

Public participation is essential to building a strong and implementable plan. Your involvement helps us to understand the needs, concerns, and values of the public; provides us with additional information that we may not have; and helps you understand the Forest Service programs and activities. We have invited public participation at every stage of the revision process to date, by sharing information, having public meetings, and seeking input as we release our initial plan building blocks. There are many ways to get involved. Talk with your local district office or visit our website for the most current information about upcoming public participation opportunities.

How can I obtain more information about forest plan revisions?

There are several ways you can find more information about forest plan revision efforts, including:
- Contact your local District Ranger Office
- Visit our Web site:http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/nfsnc/home/?cid=stelprdb5397660

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